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ABSTRACT

The character of Billy in Ernest Thompson's "On Golden Pond" does not behave like "real" young people. Instead, he takes on adult qualities, as shown in his relationships with the other characters, in his speech, in his actions, and in the observations he makes during the play. Billy's adolescent behavior serves the dramatic purposes of providing humor, advancing the plot, and fulfilling romantic ideals about the relationships between youth and old age. His character is structured equally to Ethel and Norman, but Thompson does not allow dramatic time for Billy to develop. Instead he relies on the classic comic conventions and romantic ideals to carry the character. Billy's strong personality at his entrance and his later delivery of key exposition describing his relationship with Norman result in a character who appears too "theatrical" to be credible. The problems of the juvenile role arise when the playwright depends on the character for more than he has allowed the character development to accomplish credibly, as in the case of Billy. Another problem arises when the playwright is seeking some other effect, particularly humor or pathos, and falls victim to the relative ease of creating precocious youths. In contrast, such precocious juveniles would not be tolerated in society. (HOD)

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"Billy" from On Golden Pond

The Precocious Youth in Contemporary Popular Drama

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ABSTRACT

"Billy" from On Golden Pond

The Precocious Youth in Contemporary Popular Drama

The characters of young people and children in contemporary popular drama have a unique appeal to the audience. The young people appear not to behave like young people. Instead they take on adult qualities, i.e., in their relationships with the other characters in the play, in their speech and in their thoughts. The children tend to be "little adults." In contrast, such precocious juveniles would not be tolerated in society.

This paper addresses the phenomenon of the precocious youth role in contemporary popular drama. Using On Golden Pond as the source, the paper describes the youthful character, provides examples of his precocity, examines his structural place in the play and discusses the implications of this character type with relation to the audience response. The writer hopes to provide some understanding for the delight an audience experiences in viewing precocious youths in contemporary drama.

"Billy" from On Golden Pond

The Precocious Youth in Contemporary Popular Drama

The character of Billy in Ernest Thompson's On Golden Pond does not behave like "real" young people.[1] Instead, he takes on adult qualities, as shown in his relationships with the other characters in his speech, in his actions and in the observations he makes during the play. Billy's characteristics of dramatic improbability are not unique to this play. The characters of children and young people in contemporary popular drama tend to behave as stereotyped "little adults." By contrast, such precocious juveniles would not be tolerated in "real life."

On Golden Pond began Off-Broadway in 1977 and moved to Broadway in 1978. Although the reviewers praised Thompson's writing of the old couple, Ethel and Norman Thayer, they sharply criticized the character of Billy, played by Mark Bendo. Richard Eder of the New York Times said, "Unfortunately he is a repulsively wise and patronizing child."[2] Walter Kerr of the same publication agreed, "The 13 year old is unexpectedly mawkish."[3] Jack Kroll of Newsweek added, "Billy hangs around all too long. It's hard to believe that Thompson thought this snotty tyke who says 'suck face' instead of 'kiss' would become, as Ethel puts it, 'the happiest thing that's happened to Norman since Roosevelt.'"[4] T.E. Kalem in Time simply said Billy is "a bit of a smart ass."[5]

When the play became a top box-office grossing motion picture, with Oscars around for actors Henry Fonda, Katharine Hepburn and writer Ernest Thompson, the rewritten Billy was played by Doug McKeon. Time's Richard Schickel noted that McKeon "gets the bravado, vulnerability and candor of adolescence just right."[6] Although Billy was expanded in the move from Broadway to Hollywood, the essence of the character remained intact. The same adolescent behavior which the theatre reviewers faulted in the play became a strong point in the movie version. The differences between and among the reviewers point up important questions about juvenile roles in contemporary popular drama. The issues involve the dramatic functions of juvenile roles and the resulting credibility of those roles. An examination of Billy from Ernest Thompson's On Golden Pond can provide observations about this juvenile role which may be applied to other youth characters.

Billy arrives late in the story, midway through scene three of the five scene play. His departure is early as well, midway through scene four. The stage directions describe Billy as "thirteen, short, flippant, but only to cover his awkwardness. He is eager and bright. His hair is long, his posture terrible." (Act I, scene 3, p. 80) Through the course of the play, the audience discovers that Billy's parents are divorced; his family is financially comfortable, if not well off; his father's relationship with Chelsea is openly intimate; and he has had little adult guidance, given his undirected free time and lack of disciplining. Billy has been abruptly taken from familiar surroundings in southern California to tour Europe with his father

and Chelsea. Instead of the European vacation, he is left in Maine with two old people, who are strangers to him and not part of his family. That Billy agrees to stay in Maine for the month without his friends, familiar activities or anyone his own age, indicates his resilience and independence. Given his circumstances, Billy's strong personality is a product of his ability to adapt to frequent and extreme changes. The audience is not given much time to reflect on the relative credibility of the youth's situation because of the relationship developing between him and Norman.

The characters of Billy and Norman are purposely interrelated. At thirteen, Billy is in the midst of the hormonal changes of puberty and the consequent mental and emotional confusion. His adolescent insecurity is a passage familiar to most adults. The youth's precocious "wise cracks" and his worldly wisdom balance the octogenerian's irascibility and cynicism. At 80 Norman is preoccupied with his uselessness and his mortality. Just as Billy is entering his adult life, Norman is on the verge of his exit. Norman's cutting and sarcastic comments have estranged him from those around him. Ethel tolerates his attitude, which confuses Charlie, makes Bill uncomfortable, and has become a wedge between Norman and Chelsea. On the other hand, Billy seems not to be annoyed by Norman, stating matter-of-factly, "He's bullshitting you." (Act I, scene 3, p. 109)

At their first encounter, Billy meets Norman head on:

> (BILLY sets down his suitcase and steps forward, putting out his hand, NORMAN shakes it)

BILLY: How ya doin'?

NORMAN: You seem awfully young to be a dentist.

BILLY: I'm a midget.

NORMAN: Oh, really? (Act I, scene 3, p. 80)

Norman has now met his match in Billy, whose immediate and unflinching response produces its effect on Norman and the audience. Both are delighted by Billy's ability to parry Norman's wit. Billy's precocity and irreverence allow him to stand up to the old man. Norman, not to be out-done, counters Billy a few lines later:

BILLY: I hear you turned eighty today.

NORMAN: Is that what you heard?

BILLY: Yes. That's really old.

NORMAN: Oh? You should meet my father.

BILLY: You're [sic] father's still alive?

NORMAN: No. But you should meet him. (Act I, scene 3, pp. 81-82)

Norman and Billy trade jibes, which might not be the case in real life. Such an irreverent youth might have been scolded and sent away, or at least coerced into saying nothing at all. Because of the lack of adult guidance, Billy is allowed a free reign with the situation.

Billy also provides a model for Chelsea to follow in her efforts to reestablish her relationship with her father. Chelsea feels that she has died and is only "a little fat girl" around her father (Act II, scene 1, p. 142) Having been born a girl she has considered herself a disappointment to her father. In an

effort to win Norman's approval, she attempted to participate in his favorice activities. The situation was awkward. She was an uncoordinated diver and a fisher with sympathy for the worm. Like Norman, Chelsea lives in the past. The failure she felt as a youth has undermined their present relationship. The strength of Billy's relationship with Norman encourages Chelsea in her efforts to renew her relationship with Norman.

In order for the play to move to a conclusion, Chelsea and Norman must confront their feelings of hopelessness and impotence. Norman has to deal with living in the face of death. Chelsea must stop dwelling on the past. Both need to live in the present. These are the themes of the play as pointed out by the later behavior of Norman and Chelsea. The juvenile character of Billy is the catalyst that the playwright uses to bring about the conclusion and demonstrate the theme. Billy's youthful presence is the cause for the reversal in Norman's and Chelsea's attitudes; therefore, the dramatic function of this juvenile character is to provide a foil for Norman and a balance to Chelsea. Because of this function, Billy is the structural equal to Norman and Chelsea.

Until Billy's entrance, the majority of the thoughts expressed concern old age, uselessness, dying and the past. Even Charlie's bachelorhood and the fates of the old maids are compared to the same impotence and impending doom which Norman feels. As Norman sulks around the house with little to interest him, Billy brightly and energetically explores everything. Norman takes the boy into his care to teach him fishing, French and literature. Because Billy is interested in learning, Norman

is willing to teach, giving Norman an interest in living and taking away his preoccupation with his feelings of impotency and death. Ethel admits as much when she says to Chelsea "I should have rented him a 13 year old boy years ago." (Act II, scene 1, p. 139)

A romantic notion is that children see the obvious which adults, used to mask-handling and role-playing, fail to see. Because of their lack of guile, children offer hope and a new or renewed life. In this play, the juvenile role of Billy fulfills the romantic ideal. Norman finds hope and life in his relationship with Billy, even though his friends and relatives are dying all around him. Ethel finds Billy a tonic for Norman's restlessness. By watching Billy's and Norman's relationship, Chelsea finds a way of establishing the contact with her father that she has desired. The embodiment of youthful hope and truth is an important romantic function of the stereotypical juvenile character. In order for the character to effect his changes on the established society, he must be unconventional, even at the expense of credibility. Thompson writes Billy not on the basis of reality, but on the basis of the ideal.

Billy's precocity and strong personality are important to the comic devices in the play. First, Billy and Norman take turns at playing the "end man" to the other's "interlocutor." In the two selections quoted above, Norman sets up Billy's response, "I'm a midget," which is a calculated laugh line. Later Billy sets up Norman's comic put-down, "No. But you should meet him," by playing into Norman's story. The humor arises from the two as comic vaudevillians exchanging their banter in a carefully timed

comic sketch. These moments gain further comedic strength as they are played counterpoint to the concurrent poignant moments of Chelsea's arrival.

Another comic device is Billy's language. The trendy terms of "suck face" and "cruise chicks" (Act I, scene 3, p. 112) gain humor from their relative currency and from the strong and unusual images which the terms bring forth. Further comic irony occurs in Billy's use of the word "bullshit." The unexpectedness of its use, coupled with the youth's lack of adult correction, provides calculated humor. Thompson capitalizes on the word as a running gag when Norman approves Billy's use of it:

> NORMAN: You like that word, don't you? Bullshit.
>
> BILLY: Yeah.
>
> NORMAN: It's a good word. (Act I, scene 3, p. 110)

The gag continues when Norman himself uses it unexpectedly:

> ETHEL: . . .(She heads for the kitchen.) Can you hold out ten more minutes?
>
> NORMAN: No. I'm going to bed.
>
> ETHEL: (Stopping) Oh. You're not.
>
> NORMAN: No, I'm not. I was just bullshitting you. (She shakes her head.) (Act I, scene 3, pp. 117-118)

The character of Billy also fits into the same structural mold as the slaves and children in the comedies of Terence and Plautus: youth, who should be controlled by adults, have the control in a chaotic world run by rascally adults. Billy cuts through Norman's pretense and artifice to comic results. The

innocent Billy stands up to the gruff adult; and the sarcastic Norman gets his comeuppance at the hands of a boy. The relationship between youth and old age retains its comic delight until the world is set straight. Once Norman returns to his usual self and the relationship with Chelsea begins to move forward, Thompson removes the boy.

Thompson does not allow the luxury of much stage time for Billy, despite the character's relative importance to the plot. In the short time left to him, Thompson must paint the character in broad strokes which reduce the character to a cliché and speed his development beyond credibility. To offset the character's improbability, Thompson has given Billy many of the probable attributes of youth. The boy energetically bounds on stage with a sense of wonder and interest in the world, delighting in the notion of saying hello to a lake. Billy has a sense of his own identity, his likes and dislikes. He declines the invitation to go skinny-dipping, yet he is at ease telling Norman of his free time activities at home. Billy responds positively to the adults around him. He is not sullen or belligerent. He stands up straight at Norman's request; he reads Swiss Family Robinson without complaining; and he studies French and goes fishing with Norman. Like any boy at this age, learning to become a man, he takes on the qualities of his chosen role model. Billy is a boy awkwardly putting away the things of a child to become an adult. Norman provides him with that model as he himself puts away his "childish" things for those of another sphere of maturity. In the few strokes, Thompson establishes Billy's energy and his awkwardness and the relationship between the old and the young.

Although the character of Billy has credible attributes, the limitations of time and dramatic conventions undercut that probability. The strong personality which the youth must have in order to function as the catalyst for the turning of the plot makes him both too brash and too sensitive to be a dramatically probable thirteen-year-old. Thompson gives Billy observations and lines of sensitivity which belie his age:

> ETHEL: . . .I know Norman loves having you go.
>
> BILLY: Oh, yeah, we have a lot of fun. We don't just fish, you know.
>
> ETHEL: No?
>
> BILLY: Nope. We make good use of our time. Norman makes me practice my French, and I make him tell me stories from the old days. You and Norman must have had a pretty nifty time way back then. I was surprised.
>
> ETHEL: Uh-huh.
>
> BILLY: It's good for his mind, you know, to dig back like that. Sometimes he calls me Chelsea.
>
> ETHEL: Oh. Well, you probably remind him of her in some ways.
>
> BILLY: Yeah. I always say, "Norman, you know I'm not Chelsea, I'm Billy." He's okay. I keep after him.
>
> ETHEL: Good. (Act II, scene 1, pp. 131-132)

Later Billy tells Ethel, "I wouldn't worry about Norman. I'll keep an eye on him." (Act II, scenel, p. 133) These lines of caring and concern for Norman seem unusual for a boy of thirteen. His assurance is uncanny. First, he is aware of the relation-

ships that Norman and Ethel must have had in their youth, which he is able to relate to his own youth. Next, he comments on the benefits to Norman's mental health of talking about the time "way back then." Finally, he is aware that he must remind Norman of the present by telling the older man that he is Billy, not Chelsea. Billy is unperturbed about this part in his relationship with Norman.

Because of time and stage constraints, Thompson develops and moves Billy quickly. Billy grows from the self-centered, undirected youth at his entrance, to the altruistic young man with goals that he has become through his relationship with Norman and Ethel. All this happens during the course of two half-scenes and an intermission. Thompson allows the audience to "see" the relationship between Norman and Billy through the results of their time together. The antecedent action is provided by means of Billy's relating their activities to Ethel. The exposition is necessary to the credible development of the two characters. Although the wisdom and insight that Billy expresses is not unusual for thirteen-year-old youths, such an expression seems unusual in the context of the play since the audience has not had time to get to know the character. By serving the dramatic function of messenger, Billy's probabilty of behavior as a thirteen-year-old is stretched to its limits. Fortunately, Thompson removes the boy after this scene.

Billy has many of the characteristics of an average white youth from the upper middle class feeling his hormones and the problems of a broken home. The juvenile role received strong unfavorable criticism because the character appeared artificial

compared to the presentation of Ethel and Norman. Billy's adolescent behavior serves the dramatic purposes of providing humor, advancing the plot and fulfilling romantic ideals about the relationships between youth and old age. His character is structurally equal to Ethel and Norman, but Thompson does not allow dramatic time for Billy to develop. Instead he relies on the classic comic conventions and romantic ideals to carry the character. Gerald Weakes of Commonweal points out the transparency of Billy's purpose: "anyone who grew up on Shirley Temple movies knows from the moment the boy sets foot on stage that this will be another case of the curmudgeon tamed."[7] Thompson later corrected this flaw in his adaptation for the motion picture, allowing the character and his relationships more time for development. The movie audience is able to see the action that the theatre audience hears Billy report. Billy's strong personality at his entrance and his later delivery of key exposition describing his relationship with Norman result in a character who appears too "theatrical" to be credible. With Billy, Thompson's machinery is showing in a play whose central figures of Norman and Ethel are drawn without the same artifice.

Many children characters in contemporary drama are written not for their child peers, but for adults. Since plays in which children are characters, such as On Golden Pond, involve adult themes and concerns, structurally, the children characters are means to develop the plot and explicate the theme. Their structural function within the play is on the same level as the other characters who may or may not be adult. In this respect there is no difference between characters of any age, they each have a

dramatic function. The problems of the juvenile role arise when the playwright depends on the character for more than he has allowed the character development to accomplish credibly, as in the case of Billy.

The lack of dramatic development produces a stereotypical youth in contrast to the other characters who appear more unique. Another problem arises when the playwright is seeking some other effect, particularly humor or pathos, and falls victim to the relative ease of creating precocious youths. Without proper character development, the effects derived from unexpectedly colorful language or sensitively insightful observations grates upon the ears of sensitive members of the audience who find that they have become the unwilling victims of pandering to cliché and witnesses to the damaging of dramatic integrity. The perpetuation of stereotypical, precocious youths prohibits insights into the concerns of youth or into the relationships between youth and old age or into the relationships between people regardless of their cultural status.

Notes

[1] Ernest Thompson, *On Golden Pond* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1979). All further references to this work appear in the text.

[2] Richard Eder, "Stage: 'Golden Pond' at the New Apollo," rev. of *On Golden Pond*, by Ernest Thompson, *New York Times*, Late City Ed., 1 Mar 1979, Sec. 3, p. 13, Col. 2.

[3] Walter Kerr, "Stage View: Characters with Nowhere to Go," rev. of *On Golden Pond*, by Ernest Thompson, *New York Times*, Late City Ed., 18 Mar 1979, Sec. 2, p. 3, Col. 2.

[4] Jack Kroll, "Theatre: Summer and Smoke," rev. of *On Golden Pond*, by Ernest Thompson, *Newsweek*, 12 Mar 1979, p. 103.

[5] T.E. Kalem, "Theatre: Sassy Stoic," rev. of *On Golden Pond*, by Ernest Thompson, *Time*, 12 Mar 1979, p. 83.

[6] Richard Schickel, "At Last, Kate and Hank!" rev. of *On Golden Pond*, by Ernest Thompson, *Time*, 16 Nov 1981, p. 113.

[7] Gerald Weakes, "Neat & Loose: Life in Stages -- On Stage," rev. of *On Golden Pond*, by Ernest Thompson, *Commonweal*, 106 (1979), p. 403.

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